



A Great Ethics Transition

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A Great Transition must rise on core ethical values attuned to an interdependent world facing a common destiny. What are the elements of this foundation, and how do we build it?

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Opening Essay

Toward a Great Ethics Transition: The Earth Charter at Twenty by Brendan Mackey	1
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Panel

Profit vs. Ethics by Ian Angus	9
Focus on Deep Drivers by Olivia Bina	14
Capitalism and Ethics: Cutting to the Chase by Kavita Byrd	18
Reasserting Moral Cosmopolitanism by Luis Cabrera	21
The Evolutionary Basis for Ethics by John Baird Callicott	23
It Takes a Movement by Ron Engel	27
Ethical Leadership in the Civilizational Rupture by Richard Falk	32
Ethics and the Good Life by Roger Gottlieb	36
Action Is the Path to a New Ethics by Gwendolyn Hallsmith	39
Justifying Universal Ethics by Joel Kassiola	42
Embracing Interconnectedness by Jeremy Lent	45
The Earth Charter Legacy by Steven Rockefeller	50
Enough Words, More Actions! by Roz Savage	53
On Rights and Responsibilities by Kathryn Sikkink	55
What Religions Teach Us by Mary Evelyn Tucker	59

Author's Response

Response to Comments by Brendan Mackey	65
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Toward a Great Ethics Transition

Brendan Mackey

Why a Common Ethical Framework

Seventy-two years ago, in 1948, the newly created United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With a catastrophic war fresh in people's memory, the recognition of the "inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" augured a sound ethical foundation for a hopeful future. Although the subsequent decades saw the tension and tumult of the Cold War (and some hot ones), a new internationalism was also on the upswing.

Since then, a profusion of declarations and charters have sought to establish normative ethics based on universal values and principles presumed to be shared by all people, nations, and cultures. This includes, among others, the Stockholm Declaration (1972), the World Charter for Nature (1982), the Rio Declaration (1992), the Earth Charter (2000), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), the Draft Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010), and the Principles of Climate Justice (2011).

The proposition that there are universal ethical values and principles shared among all the Peoples of the world remains contested and, in some respects, rightly so. Post-modernist critics warn us that a single idea universally applied can ignore local contexts and swallow up the diverse values that reside in the richly textured tapestry that is the hallmark of human society and our biocultural relationships. However, between the bookends of absolutism (where there is only one truth) and radical relativism (where everything is subjective) lies a pluralism that leaves open the question of which of our many choices are valid and justified.¹ From this perspective, normative ethics seeks principles to guide moral conduct when considering the

right and wrong thing to do in specific contexts, and accepts that there are serious consequences from our actions (and inactions) that can be objectively assessed.

A universal ethical framework may seem like a distant hope given the growth of populist authoritarianism and a narrowing interpretation of national self-interest. However, the multiple global threats and pressures we collectively face demand global solutions and unprecedented levels of international cooperation among national governments, across all sectors and between all Peoples. Any such systemic transformation will require a roadmap guided by shared values about what we want the future to look like and an agreed set of normative ethical principles to provide the necessary moral guidance.

The Earth Charter Story

The Earth Charter, now nearing its twentieth anniversary, remains one of the most sweeping efforts to define such a global ethic. Its origins date back to the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (or “Brundtland Commission”), entitled *Our Common Future*, which recommended the creation of a new international charter with principles to guide the transition to sustainable development. Maurice Strong, one of the report’s drafters and a former executive director of the UN Environment Program, followed through on this recommendation by putting the drafting of an Earth Charter on the agenda of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, for which he was Secretary-General. The international community however, passed on this opportunity, instead supporting the package of “Rio Commitments.” Following the Earth Summit, Strong, together with Mikhail Gorbachev working through Green Cross International, and with support from the Dutch government, launched in 1995 a project to draft an Earth Charter as a civil society initiative. Extensive consultations on Earth Charter principles were conducted through 1995 and 1996, followed by the establishment of an Earth Charter Commission, comprised of respected sustainability leaders. In 1997, a drafting committee was formed, and the drafting process began. Importantly, the Earth Charter Commission retained control of the text of the Earth Charter and has never considered changing or adding to the text, nor has it established a procedure for doing this. Over the next four years, a growing network of national committees, civil society organizations,

experts in various fields, and concerned and interested individuals weighed in via a series of global, regional, and national consultations.

The drafting process aimed to develop a text based on an analysis of existing international law and declarations, including those by civil society, and met with stakeholders across the globe to reach agreement on a document that reflected a global consensus on shared values and principles for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. In March 2000, the Commission met at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris to finalize the document, and the Earth Charter was formally launched in ceremonies at The Peace Palace in The Hague.² Earth Charter International (ECI) was subsequently established, comprising the ECI Secretariat, its Education Center, and the ECI Council, to carry the work forward. The ECI Secretariat, based at the United Nations-mandated University for Peace

in Costa Rica, aims to promote the mission, vision, strategies, and policies adopted by the ECI Council. The Charter has been translated into over forty languages and endorsed by over 7,000 organizations, including UNESCO and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The Earth Charter is a rich text, consisting of sixteen main principles and sixty-one supporting principles organized into the four themes: Respect and Care for the Community of Life; Ecological Integrity; Social and Economic Justice; and Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace. These principles are bookended by a preamble and a concluding statement called “The Way Forward.” The Earth Charter drafting processes aimed to articulate a world ethic that complements and builds on those ethical norms situated within specific cultural and geographical contexts. Although the final product was sweeping in scope, the drafting process did still draw boundaries, for example, by limiting the text to ethical values and principles for which there was evidence of a broad and diverse base of support either in civil society or in formal intergovernmental instruments. As a result, the Earth Charter remains a document of its time. While originally conceived as an ethical framework for national governments, as a Peoples’ Charter, the Earth Charter does not specify what particular responsibilities fall upon which actors and sectors of society. And, while outlining the major global challenges at the time, it does not identify the root causes of our crises.

The Earth Charter’s ethic reflects an ambitious effort to bring together ecological and social concerns within one framework, mindful of humanity’s special relationship with our planetary

home and the greater community of life. The Earth Charter recognizes that achieving social and economic justice will require both ensuring ecological integrity as well as the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent—among other things. As a global ethic, the Earth Charter has the characteristics of what Nigel Dower calls a rooted and ecologically sensitive cosmopolitanism. It is a covenant that defines an overarching way of life and answers the question of how to construct our lives together such that all life flourishes. From this perspective, the Earth Charter can be seen as a voluntary, unconditional commitment to our relationships with other persons, nature, and those things recognized as embodying the goodness, rightness, and truth of our being, and the moral obligations required to maintain and fulfill these relationships in the midst of the inevitable uncertainties and contingencies we face.

The Next Twenty Years

The Earth Charter opens with the statement that “We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future.” The urgency of this moment cannot be exaggerated: global warming, just one of many crises we face, is already causing systemic disruptions and heading past the 1.5 °C threshold necessary for a livable planet by 2040 and well beyond 3 °C by the end of this century. The integrity of our systems of governance is cracking, and current institutional arrangements are struggling to provide the necessary regulatory oversight.

Achieving sustainability will also require lifelong commitment by people of courage, acting individually and collectively in their communities and polity, to make judgments about what is right and wrong in human affairs and take the actions needed to advance that which is judged good and just. We cannot rely on the notion that good will inevitably prevail because it is divinely pre-ordained or inevitable given a rising tide of cosmic consciousness, notwithstanding the importance of each person’s spiritual development.

The Earth Charter, and its sister declarations of universal ethical values and principles, can be put to work in meeting our collective challenges. All political and economic decisions and policies, however apparently pragmatic such as matters of trade and defense, entail ethical considerations. We need to normalize the idea of calling out the ethical dimensions of public and vested interest

responses to the urgent problems of our time, including the climate and biodiversity crises, and subjecting them to critical moral evaluation.

Global economics and its governance could be fruitfully aligned with Earth Charter principles. We need to build systems that are supportive of the greater community of life and the interdependence of people and nature. The scope of the problem suggests the need for a new World Environment Organization mandated with a trusteeship function over global public goals and common goods, with the Earth Charter articulating the ethical basis of these trusteeship duties. Although the idea of new international institutions swims against the prevailing current, we will not have the “green economy” we need without a new economic vision and the institutional means to regulate private abuse of the global commons and goods held in common.³

In addition to new institutions, we also need ongoing dialogue about ethics. The Earth Charter recognized this, asserting, “We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.” Much has happened in the two decades since the launch of the Earth Charter that has enriched and added to the global dialogue on ethics and sustainability, in both formal policy forums and in civil society deliberations. Furthermore, many problems, such as climate change, have grown in scale and urgency, and others, such as the disruptions caused by technological innovations, have arisen, straining political and economic systems. The lexicon of sustainability has expanded in response to these developments. One example is the influence of First Nations worldviews, values, and principles in national and international policy and law. The term “Mother Earth” has now received formal recognition through the UN General Assembly’s adoption of a resolution to designate April 22 as International Mother Earth Day, and Mother Earth is referred to in the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Earth Charter’s section on ecological integrity is also in need of updating to incorporate more recent concepts that are now central to our understanding of global sustainability, such as “planetary boundaries” and the “Anthropocene.”

If the promise of the Earth Charter is to be realized, a platform is needed to facilitate ongoing dialogue around the ethical dimensions of the urgent global problems we face, the application to them of accepted ethical norms, as well as the search for new universal norms and principles

to guide our responses. This undertaking raises a number of practical questions, such as who would lead the effort, and what organization has the credibility and is in a position to organize and conduct the kind of inclusive international dialogue that would be required? This would have to be much more than just an archiving exercise but a process of deliberative and engaged dialogue from which is forged ethical principles of a covenantal nature.

My call for enabling the Earth Charter to speak directly to critical contemporary events and policy issues and for continuing the global ethics dialogue that led to the Earth Charter is not alone: many persons who have played significant roles in the Earth Charter movement since its inception in the 1990s have likewise argued for its importance.⁴ There are thousands of citizens as well as experts in every country of the world who are eager to participate in a renewed global ethics dialogue, and with the potential to empower the Earth Charter and its vision for the great transition we so desperately need.⁵ All that is lacking is a formal procedure by which this can take place, underwritten by a strong international institutional base, and the leadership that can assure its credibility and inspire worldwide participation.

Twenty years ago, Kamla Chowdhry, one of the founding members of the Earth Charter Commission, asked, How can we ensure that ethical and spiritual values get a fair hearing with the economist, technologist, and the industrialist? How do we weld economics with ethics, and have a technology with a human face?⁶ Answering those questions remains central to our efforts today for a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world.

Endnotes

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Forum



Profit vs. Ethics

Ian Angus

“As historical experience reveals, voluntaristic wishful thinking — often wedded to a direct appeal to the authority of claimed moral imperatives — tends to predominate in politics precisely at times when the advocated political objectives are poorly grounded, due to the inherent weakness of those who promote them. Direct appeal to morality in such political discourse is used as an imaginary substitute for identifiable material and political forces which would secure the realization of the desired objectives.” — István Mészáros¹

The argument for a new environmental ethic, simply put, is that the dominant worldview in modern society considers human needs to be more important than those of non-humans. So long as such anthropocentric ethics predominate, the destruction of the natural world will continue unabated. Robyn Eckersley writes:

If humans are taken to be more valuable beings than other species, then it would always follow that any human need, want or desire must necessarily take priority over the need or interests of nonhuman nature, no matter how critical or essential the latter needs may be.²

What is needed, therefore, is a new system of ethics that recognizes the moral right of non-human nature to exist and develop without human interference and regardless of human needs.

“Simulacra of Morality”

The founders of ecocentric philosophy were convinced that they were making fundamentally important major advances in philosophy and ethics. Roderick Nash described the conclusions of environmental ethics as “revolutionary,” claiming that they were “arguably the most dramatic expansion of morality in the course of human thought.”³ That sounds radical, but in practice, evolutionary ethics has proven very difficult to pin down. Conflicting interpretations of non-anthropocentrism and intrinsic value multiplied.

The debates go on and on, reminiscent of medieval scholastics discussing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre says that in our time, “in moral argument the apparent assertion of principles functions as a mask for expressions of personal preference.” The result is “simulacra of morality” characterized by interminable debates in which there is no rational way to choose between the various positions.⁴

That is certainly true of the debates among environmental ethicists. After fifty years of discussion, there is no agreement on what ecocentrism and biocentrism and intrinsic value and other key terms might actually mean in practice. The most notable feature of these debates is how abstract they are. Book after book discusses environmental ethics while making few concrete references to actual environmental problems. Instead, we are presented with “social/moral theories which presuppose a world radically different from the one we occupy, thereby rendering them irrelevant as solutions to the problems which face us in the real, non-fantasy world.”⁵

A case in point is Richard Sylvan’s widely cited “last man” argument for a new environmental ethic. Under the basic chauvinism that characterizes existing Western ethical systems, he wrote, it would be morally acceptable for the last man on earth to systematically and deliberately destroy every other living thing on the planet.⁶ This fantasy has been justly called radically under-described. What happened to everyone else? Did they all die at once, or was this a long process? Could one man actually destroy every living thing? Why would the last man destroy everything? Is it wanton destruction, or an act of despair, or some bizarre religious rite?

Even if we willingly suspend disbelief in Sylvan’s Twilight Zone scenario, why should anyone believe that the existence (or not) of ecocentric ethics would have any effect whatsoever on the behavior of the last man—or of anyone else, for that matter?

MacIntyre’s critique of moral discussions that “apparently can find no terminus” has rarely been better illustrated. The participants in these debates are professional academic philosophers using the most sophisticated tools of argument and analysis that the field has developed. The fact that they cannot agree strongly suggests that there is something fundamentally wrong.

Morality versus Moralism

In an article revealingly titled “Environmental Philosophy IS Environmental Activism: The Most Radical and Effective Kind,” environmental philosopher Baird Callicott insists that the quest for non-anthropocentric ethics has direct practical application:

If all environmental values are anthropocentric and instrumental, then they have to compete head to head with the economic values derived from converting rain forests to lumber and pulp, savannas to cattle pasture, and so on. Environmentalists, in other words, must show that preserving biological diversity is of greater instrumental value to present and future generations than is lucrative timber extraction, agricultural conversion, hydroelectric impoundment, mining, and so on. For this simple reason, a persuasive philosophical case for the intrinsic value of nonhuman natural entities and nature as a whole would make a huge practical difference.⁷

To take this seriously, we have to believe that only the absence of a “persuasive philosophical case” has allowed giant corporations to continue destroying forests and savannas.

Imagine the president of Exxon or Monsanto explaining to shareholders that profits are down because a professor had alerted them to the intrinsic value of nonhuman natural entities. Imagine the shareholders applauding vigorously and voting him a big bonus for extending moral consideration to ecosystems! In the real world, a mountain of hard scientific evidence, including detailed accounts of the probable impact of global warming on both human and nonhuman nature, has made no practical difference to greenhouse gas emissions. The power and profits of the fossil fuel industry and its allies determine the environmental agenda, not science or ethics.

“Lucrative timber extraction, agricultural conversion, hydroelectric impoundment, mining, and so on” do not continue because of bad philosophy, but precisely because of how lucrative they are. Morality has nothing to do with the plunderers’ decisions: so long as it is profitable to destroy the earth, and there is no counterforce that can to stop them, they will continue to do so, even if they undermine the sources of their wealth and the conditions that make the earth livable.

That is not to say that anti-ecological behavior should not be condemned on moral grounds—rather, it is to insist on the vital distinction between morality and moralism. As Perry Anderson writes, that distinction helps overcome the tendency of moral judgments “to become substitutes for explanatory accounts of history”:

Moral consciousness is certainly indispensable to the very idea of socialism: Engels himself emphasized that ‘a really human morality’ would be one of the hallmarks of communism, the finest product of its conquest of the age-old social divisions and antagonisms rooted in scarcity. Moralism, on the other hand, denotes the vain intrusion of moral judgments in lieu of causal understanding.⁸

Moral judgments in lieu of causal understanding—that phrase should be inscribed over the entrance of every department of environmental ethics.

Endnotes

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3. Roderick Nash, *The Rights of Nature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 7.
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Focus on Deep Drivers

Olivia Bina

Allow me to start from the concluding remarks by Brendan Mackey in his inspiring [essay](#) quoting the words of a founding member of the Earth Charter, Kamla Chowdhry:

*How can we ensure that ethical and spiritual values get a fair hearing with the economist, technologist, and the industrialist? How do we weld economics with ethics, and have a technology with a human face?*¹

The focus of these questions allows me to share some ideas about the Charter's present and future by engaging with two broad areas of intervention: "ethical *and* spiritual values" and "economics and technology." Perhaps not by chance, these two areas echo the powerful spectrum of *proximate and ultimate* drivers in a Great Transition, where population, technology, economy, and governance are proximate drivers and values, needs, knowledge/understanding, power structure, and culture are the ultimate ones.² This spectrum is also found in Donella Meadows's twelve *leverage points*, where the highest and most powerful leverage (linked to the ultimate drivers) refers to (10) changing goals, (11) changing paradigms, mindsets, and worldviews, and (12) transcending paradigms.³ Moreover, another way of discussing this spectrum is to explore the inner and outer dimensions of transition and transformation, where it is argued that, compared to mainstream approaches to change and transition, much more focus is needed on the former elements of change.⁴

The Earth Charter has deep roots in ultimate drivers, highest leverage points, and inner transformation. Yet, by and large, Western governments and the multilateral organizations they (just about) still largely control have focused on proximate drivers, on low leverage, on outer transitions. The other side of the spectrum has been left to the margins—many would argue, for ideological positioning as much as for feelings of discomfort. Yet, they have so much to do

with the ethical and spiritual values discussed here, precisely because they inform the goals, the paradigms, and the mindsets shaping the questions, problems, and solutions. If this bias (or can we now call it failure?) persists, we may be more likely to head towards the kind of techno-scientific utopias that, in most imaginaries, transform into dystopias.⁵

It's time to balance it out.

We cannot move towards the more promising, just, and sustainable vision of the Great Transition if we do not engage with both ends of the spectrum of change. Nowhere is this more pressing, and inadequately addressed, than in the tightening alliance between economy and technology, where the latter seems to have almost taken definitive control of the former (or was this always the case?). Technology's framing of solutions is catching up with the framing of the problem, largely unencumbered by ethical (or spiritual) concerns. Sheila Jasanoff's inquiry into the rise to power of biology and its disciplinary evolution offers a sobering illustration.⁶ The appeal for "pragmatic" solutions is precisely aimed at excluding "ethical considerations"—one of the aspects discussed by Mackey in his search for a renewed role for the Earth Charter.

It is the discomfort that needs to be addressed, so that we can feel safe and capable of navigating the space between Mackey's bookends "of absolutism... and radical relativism" and finding solace in the ocean of "pluralism," with the help of the rising voices of post-development, which Bayo Akomolafe has poetically reframed as "the urgency of nurturing the manifold worlds that breathe seditiously."⁷ This, in my view, can be done only if we can create the space to question the epistemological and ontological roots of the powerful alliance (and grip on frames) between economics and technology—in other words, if we find the courage to explore the potential change offered by ultimate drivers, deep leverage points, and inner changes.

In this sense, I am less convinced of the need to pursue a new multilateral organization (though by no means against it), as I would see it as another proximate, or external change-type of solution. But I would like to offer one possible avenue to combine the Earth Charter's wisdom and the Great Transition vision: what if we brought into conversation the Earth Charter's ethical compass and intrinsic ultimate goal of systems that are "supportive of the greater community of

life” fully acknowledging the “interdependence of people and nature” (quoting Mackey), with the UN 2030 Agenda and its set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—so that together they might help move earthlings towards a Great Transition?

Many have argued that the SDGs need an ultimate goal. As they stand, the seventeen intermediate goals risk performing worse than the earlier division of three pillars (economy, society and environment), limiting implementation through proximate drivers, shallow leverage, and outer change. Can the Charter be the guiding framework for the SDGs, so that the transformative potential envisaged by Ban Ki-moon might actually stand a chance?

The SDGs may fall short of GTI’s vision, but they may just offer a potential bridge to higher aspirations, if...guided by ethical and spiritual values.

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Capitalism and Ethics: Cutting to the Chase

Kavita Byrd

Let's just cut to the chase here: we can't talk about ethics without talking about capitalism. By any ethical standards, capitalism is an inherently unethical system. What can be more unethical than being concerned with one's own self-profit, regardless of the consequences ("externalities") to others and the planet? Ethics is, above all, concerned with our interconnectedness—our relatedness, interdependence, and responsibility to others, including both other humans and the natural world of which we are a part. So trying to graft ethics onto a capitalist system simply can't work—they are antithetical. Beyond a mere statement of ethical ideals (to which we would almost all agree), we need an economic system that embodies them—a new economic system whose central values, priorities, and structures are inherently ethical, flowing from the core recognition of our interdependence and therefore the need to cooperate, equitably, justly and sustainably, with each other and all of nature, in which we are inextricably embedded.

Capitalism is, historically, the culminating expression of a divisive consciousness—individualism, competition, domination, limitless rapaciousness, and exploitation of other people, cultures, and the planet; these are the values it exalts and rewards. Self-profit—taking more than one gives—is its central motive, its highest value, and in its advanced, neoliberal, deregulated version, there are no holds barred. It is inevitable that such an "ethic"—antithetical to all true ethics—would lead to the crises we are facing today, existential in every sense, both in making meaning of life and our very survival. So it is clear that any truly ethical, as well as any effective, approach to addressing our crises demands a new global economic system, based on the foundational ethical tenets of interdependence, cooperation, mutual responsibility to each other and all of nature; equity, justice, and social and ecological regeneration flow naturally from that basis.

If we can't evolve to an ethics and economics of unity, we will simply not survive. We are being compelled to move from a divisive consciousness to a unitive one, and embody it in action—which means an ethics of interdependence at the center of our economic, ecological, and governance systems. Our crises are delivering this imperative as an ultimatum. If we fail to rise to this call, we simply will not survive, even as we bring down thousands of other species with us.

As to how to avert our demise, our primary concern at this point should be less with configuring an ethical framework (I think most of us agree with that by now) than in generating political traction for the changes so urgently needed. Richard Falk named some of the major obstacles we face, and I can think of two others. First, the neoliberal decades have bred a sense of apathy and powerlessness, disabling in those who lived through them a sense of agency, will, and imagination, both moral and creative. Second, and more recently, many people of good will, even erstwhile activists, while convinced and alarmed by the crises, have also been convinced that it is too late now to make any difference. This attitude, apparently, has been deliberately promoted by some of the same forces profiting from the crises that until very recently were promoting denial—now that it is too late to deny the exploding crises, doomerism serves the same purpose of ensuring inaction; in either case, the continuation of their business as usual goes unchallenged. This doesn't mean, of course, that our situation isn't a dire one—it is. It just means that giving up (or just “adapting”) and allowing business as usual to continue actually guarantees our demise, as hopelessness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We need to use crisis mode to motivate further action, not dampen it... But what action, and to what ends?

The bright spot on the horizon is, of course, the uprising of the young people and the mass nonviolent civil disobedience protests (the School Strikes, Extinction Rebellion, etc.) that have gained such momentum in the last year. I keep thinking if this momentum—itsself driven by the desire, implicit though still inchoate, for a new ecological, ethical, and regenerative system—could be galvanized and wedded to a practical plan for transition, we stand our best chance of surviving and thriving into the future. Such a plan could be collaboratively generated by the most knowledgeable and progressive alternative economists, indigenous and social justice activists, spiritual and ecological leaders, and the new young activists with the freshness of their passion and imagination. Such an alliance could provide, for instance, Greta Thunberg and the school strikes

movement, with clear demands and a detailed plan of action, that doesn't leave the solutions in the hands of the governments or the corporate-banking nexus that are causing the crises, but clearly demands a whole new direction and steps for its implementation.

I think we need a transition plan—a kind of Global New Green Deal, not just for the transition to renewable energy but a whole new society, ethical, ecological, and regenerative—a vision that can channel, give shape and direction to the passion for change rising up so powerfully from the youth and grassroots now. I do not think this can be left to blessed unrest alone or an inchoate movement with no name. We need to articulate a clear vision and access the most potent leverage points to move it forward. Now that the passion and energy for change are rising up so powerfully from the youth and grassroots, this may be the most powerful moment to galvanize that transition. In that way, we would put our ethics into action.

About the Author



Kavita Byrd works to bring together holistic consciousness, healing, and whole-systems change, with an emphasis on evolutionary spirituality and sacred activism. This has included research on ecology, climate change and new economics, integrating universal spiritual wisdom and radical social action for evolutionary global transformation. She is the author of the poetry collection *Love Songs of the Undivided* and the book *Quantum Co-Creative Revolution: We Are All in This Together*. She holds a BA in English Literature and Creative Writing from Princeton University.



Reasserting Moral Cosmopolitanism

Luis Cabrera

Brendan Mackey's essay calling for renewed attention to the Earth Charter is a timely piece and a reminder of how much times have changed. It is timely because, in an era where the world hurtles toward devastating and potentially irreversible effects from climate change, the Charter's opening line seems even more apt now than two decades ago: "We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future."

The essay reminds us how much times have changed because it reminds us of the post-Cold War optimism animating the Earth Charter and other efforts which sought to promote global ethical/moral standards backed by reformed global governance institutions, for example, the World Environment Organization for which Mackey calls. It reminds us how that optimism deflated after the September 11, 2001 attacks and the US-led "war on terror," and how it has further receded in an era of global democratic retreat and right-wing populism ascending across Europe and in the United States, Brazil, India, Turkey, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Today, instead of President George H. W. Bush's call for a "New World Order," the leader of the system's most powerful state wields the word "globalist" as an epithet, as in his September 2019 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, when he declared, "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots."

Mackey's essay is valuable in part for acknowledging the changed climate, but also for insisting that a continuing commitment to the values and vision of efforts such as the Earth Charter is not misplaced, and that it is important to continue advocating for them and seeking to promote institutional changes. The essay's concerns intersect, in fact, with a significant vein of academic thinking on how to actually motivate support for cosmopolitan moral principles,

meaning ones which treat all persons' interests as equally morally significant. Critics have held that most persons simply won't be persuaded to take on any demanding duties across international borders, thus moral cosmopolitanism is a practical nonstarter. Mackey's essay highlights and confronts a similar challenge.

Some cosmopolitan thinkers have responded by examining ways in which psychological tendencies to develop empathy for others under certain circumstances could be encouraged through policy, educational, and civil society efforts. Others have focused on ways people tend to be motivated to avoid causing harm, and they have highlighted ways in which the relatively affluent globally are implicated in structural harms visited on the global poor. Some others have taken a tack implied in Mackey's essay of emphasizing collective harms arising in a global system when each state or people simply pursues its own perceived interests. Finally, some have pinned their hopes on intensifying globalization creating a backlash that would result not in populist and nativist *disintegration*, but in calls from below for much greater popular participation in the processes of global economic integration.

Each cosmopolitan motivation or realization strategy faces intensified challenges in the right-wing populist era. The challenge for each is distinctive to their differing strategies, but they all face a common task exemplified by Mackey's essay: providing a cosmopolitan or global-ethical counter-narrative to the populist denouncement of straw-person "globalists." As Mackey emphasizes, it can be crucial to offer that alternative in public discourse, to maintain it as another possibility for when political winds may once more shift, and to help make such a shift more possible.

About the Author



Luis Cabrera is Associate Professor of Political Science in the Griffith Asia Institute and School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. His research has focused on trans-state normative issues, including human rights, citizenship and migration, and the development of democratically accountable regional and global political institutions. His books include *The Practice of Global Citizenship*, *The Theory of Global Justice*, and *The Humble Cosmopolitan: Rights, Diversity, and Trans-state Democracy*. Before turning to academia full time, Cabrera worked as a staff reporter for The Associated Press in Seattle. He holds a PhD from the University of Washington.



The Evolutionary Basis for Ethics

J. Baird Callicott

In his opening essay, Brendan Mackey reflects on the necessity of a common ethical framework, indicating its appearance in various international declarations. But on what basis does such a common ethical framework, such a universal ethic, rest?

In his 1933 article “The Conservation Ethic,” Aldo Leopold noted that over “the three thousand years” of recorded Western history (going back to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), “ethical criteria have been extended to many fields of conduct.” He goes on, “This extension of ethics, *so far studied only by philosophers*, is actually a process in ecological evolution. Its sequences may be described in biological as well as philosophical terms” (emphasis added).¹

Going back to Darwin himself—who devoted two entire chapters of the second edition of *The Descent of Man* to “the moral sense”—there has been a biological account of ethics running in a parallel universe of discourse to the philosophical account. Biologically, ethics are characterized by “a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence,” as Leopold put it. But how can voluntary, self-imposed limitations on freedom of action in the competitive struggle for existence have possibly evolved through descent with modification and natural selection? It seems that the more coldly selfish and ruthless individuals would outcompete the selfless and the guileless. Answer: when the struggle for existence proves to be more efficient and successful when pursued collectively and cooperatively than singly and individually. “No tribe,” Darwin notes, “could hold together if murder, robbery, treachery, etc. were common—hence such crimes are ‘branded with everlasting infamy.’” And if the tribe cannot hold together, its erstwhile members will find themselves starving to death or falling victim to a predator. Ethics are necessary for social cohesion, and membership in a cohesive society is necessary for

individual survival in the struggle for existence and, just as important, reproductive success. Thus a proclivity to ethical behavior was naturally selected, motivated by what David Hume, a century earlier, had called the “moral sentiments”—love, sympathy, care, beneficence, generosity, sense of fairness, responsibility, loyalty, and many others. These moral sentiments, Darwin argued, were universal in the species *Homo sapiens*, a quintessentially social animal.

Darwin, however, employed the concept of group selection in his account of ethics: those groups that were more cohesive and cooperative outcompeted those that were less so, thus exerting evolutionary pressure toward enhancing, refining, intensifying, and extending the moral sentiments felt by individual group members. After the so-called modern synthesis of Darwinian evolutionary theory and Mendelian genetics in the 1930s, group selection became anathema in evolutionary biology. The level of selection was downscaled from the individual phenotype to the genotype. How could evolutionary biologists account for the existence of “altruism” (the subordination of self-interest to the interests of others)—the observable surrogate for ethics—when it all comes down to the “selfish gene?” There were two answers: kin selection and reciprocal altruism, consolidated in Edward O. Wilson’s controversial tome *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and cousins share fractions (a half, a fourth) of each other’s genes, so those crafty genes make us love, care, and sacrifice for our close kin, thus serving the genes’ own selfish end (maximum representation in future generations). And they also make us serve the interests of non-kin acquaintances in the expectation that those folks will later reciprocate and serve our interests and thus the interests of our selfish genes.

Sociobiology became so toxic that those who have latterly taken up and advanced the biological account of ethics quietly changed the name of the field to “evolutionary moral psychology.” And group selection has now made a comeback under the rubric of “multilevel selection”—because kin selection and reciprocal altruism working in tandem failed to explain all the moral facts.

Now, here is my comment on universal ethics. The moral sentiments are universal in the human species, as Darwin surmised (and as did Hume before him), but they are underdetermined. Toward whom one should feel sympathy, to which group one should feel loyal, who counts when one’s sense of fairness comes into play—such matters are determined by culture. It’s not nature or nurture; it’s nature and nurture. Similarly, it’s not affect (the moral emotions) or reason (cognition);

it's affect and reason. And while human nature at the genetic level changes on a Darwinian evolutionary time scale, human culture changes on a Lamarckian evolutionary time scale (which is ever accelerating) at the memetic level. We may not be able to change hearts, but we can change minds. Racists are not mean-spirited; they are narrow-minded. We combat racism, sexism, nationalism, religionism, and other divisive "isms" precisely by disclosing the universal humanity that we—genetically a single species—all share. It is true that no tribe can hold together if murder, robbery, treachery, etc., are common. But there is just one tribe we all now belong to as the world is tied together by a global economy and global transportation and communications networks. Yet there is still room for non-divisive cultural diversity in language, food, art, music, architecture, fashion, sexuality, and other exuberant expressions of human creativity. Ethical universality is not cultural uniformity.

At long last, a few mainstream moral philosophers have picked up on the biological account of ethics—and dismissed it out of hand. Why? Because it is descriptive, not prescriptive. Granted, we are genetically programmed to lavish love, care, and sacrifice on our close kin and not strangers. But is that really right? Is that what we really ought to do? Further, the biological account of ethics carries no moral bite, no normative force. Intramurally dominating mainstream moral philosophy have been two competing paradigms—utilitarianism and deontology—which are, despite their very real differences, united on one fundamental point: to be moral, an action must be rational. It must not violate the most fundamental rule of reason: self-consistency, or non-contradiction. According to deontology, we put an action to this test question (which we've all heard from our mothers): What if everyone acted that way? What if everyone always stole the property of others? There would be no property to steal as everything would belong to everyone and thus no one. What if everyone always broke their promises? There would be no promises to break because no one would believe a promise, and because no one would believe a promise, no one would make a promise. Promise-making would cease to exist or never have come into existence in the first place. According to utilitarianism, it is contradictory to treat equal interests unequally. Where is the normative force, withal? We act immorally on pain of self-contradiction; we behave irrationally. This rational reduction of ethics, detached from feelings of love, care, sympathy, loyalty, and the other moral sentiments, may be convincing to philosophers, but it does not align well with our actual moral experience—not even the moral experience of most mainstream moral philosophers themselves.

In the biological account of ethics, moral norms are more like medical norms. A temperature of 98.6 degrees F is normal, and it is also good. When it falls significantly above or below that norm, a person is sick (in a bad condition) and in need of medical intervention. Physical abnormalities and disabilities are not morally censurable, but some psychological abnormalities and disabilities are—for example, a lack of empathy. Due to genetic defect or trauma, psychopaths and sociopaths lack some or all of the moral sentiments; and they are in need psychological intervention. And if that is not successful, then isolation from society (the modern equivalent of banishment from the group) is the only recourse. Racists, sexists, nationalists, and religious fanatics may not be wanting in the moral sentiments, but they are in need of cognitive updating, so that their moral sentiments are stimulated and directed in ways that correspond to the socio-environmental situation as it has now come to be: one global society, one global atmosphere, one global ocean—in short, one world.²

Endnotes

1. Aldo Leopold, "The Conservation Ethic," *Journal of Forestry* 31, no. 6 (October 1933): 634.
2. For a full discussion of these and related matters, see J. Baird Callicott, *Thinking Like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

About the Author



J. Baird Callicott is Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus at the University of North Texas. He is co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Encyclopedia of Environmental Ethics and Philosophy*. Callicott has served the International Society for Environmental Ethics as President and Yale University as Bioethicist-in-Residence. He is the leading contemporary exponent of Aldo Leopold's land ethic and has elaborated an Earth ethic, *Thinking Like a Planet*, in response to climate change. His most recent book is *Greek Natural Philosophy: The Presocratics and their Importance for Environmental Philosophy*.



It Takes a Movement

Ron Engel

If we are to grasp the “ethical foundations” for the Great Transition, further elaboration of the ethical vision to which we are called to bear witness must take place within a much broader dialogue on how to build an international movement with the power to usher in an era of just, sustainable and non-violent global governance.

The historical grounds for doing this are clear with respect to the Earth Charter. The Charter was linked from its inception with the prospects of international law and science as the chief means to implement its global vision and ethic. The model was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The adoption of the Declaration by the United Nations in 1948 was followed by two groundbreaking international treaties and the formation of a strong civil society network committed to the advancement of human rights. The Earth Charter Council hoped that in similar fashion the adoption of the Earth Charter by the UN General Assembly would mark a major advance in the articulation of the spiritual and ethical mission of the United Nations by framing the long standing universal values of justice and peace within a strong Earth centered perspective and thus pave the way for the subsequent adoption of the IUCN-proposed “Draft International Covenant on Environment and Development.”

Only toward the end of the second drafting effort, in the late 1990s, did it become clear that there was little chance for the adoption of the Earth Charter by the General Assembly. At the same time, it became clear that the United States and Britain were going to continue their post-Reagan/Thatcher retreat from support for international law in areas other than finance and trade. Hope for significant implementation of the Charter lay in a broad international coalition of scientists, civil society activists, ecologically committed religious faiths, a select number of progressive governments, and responsible business interests.

After its launch in 2000, the leadership of the Earth Charter Council was faced with the question of whether to form a membership organization or whether the direction of the Earth Charter Initiative (ECI) should remain in the hands of a self-perpetuating private board, the Earth Charter Council. A few of us argued strongly for a membership organization, but the second alternative was chosen.

Over the last twenty years, the Earth Charter Initiative at the University of Peace in Costa Rica has coordinated a far flung informal network of domestic and international civil society organizations, sponsored a website, sought endorsements of the Charter, provided educational resources in association with UNESCO, held conferences, and encouraged affiliated groups to use the text

in ways they believe most effective in their communities—all this, and more, with very limited resources, and all to the good. However, to the best of my knowledge, there have been no official positions taken in the name of the Charter on what policies are required to address critical global issues such as climate change, the sixth extinction, vast economic inequality, or the increase in the threat of nuclear war; no criticisms made of any government or corporate actions, such as the American invasion of Iraq or withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord; no support for any controversial political leader or cause; no call for help for any of the massive humanitarian crises across the planet; no comprehensive critique of the geopolitical forces and neoliberal ideologies that rule the world.

In its failure to take concrete ethical and political positions, the Earth Charter Council mirrors the World Social Forum, suggesting a weakness across liberal international civil society that may help explain its failure to bring about substantial social change. There seems to be an assumption that the Charter expresses a submerged consciousness or hidden consensus among the peoples of the world on universal spiritual and ethical principles and that once articulated, and the opportunity for endorsement offered, practical changes in society will follow. I do not believe this is true. I believe the Earth Charter, like the Great Transition Initiative, represents a minority position seeking to be a world consensus. Declarations such as the Earth Charter can help bring people together and inspire the better angels of our nature. But much more is needed. The vision of the

Earth Charter is inherently a political vision affecting all spheres of human governance, and political power must be mobilized on behalf of specific policies and goals to fulfill its promise.

In my view, a serious effort to build a movement capable of providing a strong ethical foundation for the Great Transition would consist of the following elements:

- (1) a text that sets forth an inspiring vision of humanity's membership in the community of life and the ethical responsibilities it has for the just, sustainable, and non-violent flourishing of the planet with strong empirical and rational claims to truth;
- (2) a challenge to each locality and nation across the world to engage in a process of drafting a "charter" that will spell out an ethical vision for its particular community and its special obligations to the world community and the shared international ethical vision;
- (3) a procedure for drafting revisions that elaborate, amend, or supplement these texts in light of new experience and understanding—in other words, the composition of "living documents";
- (4) a way for persons and groups in all social locations throughout the world to participate in the articulation of global and local ethics;
- (5) voices that bear witness to those places across the world that are bleeding and are on the edge of the global ethical struggle;
- (6) a set of prescribed policies that need to be pursued to address the great moral issues before the global community, both within and beyond the spheres of domestic and international law;
- (7) a diagnosis of the geopolitical and economic causes of our present plight and the agencies responsible for it;
- (8) a strategy for mobilizing political will for confronting these agencies and replacing them with alternative forms of democratic governance;
- (9) a program of civic education in the justifications for the ethical vision and the responses necessary to implement it;

(10) a covenanted, democratic organizational structure for the movement with the leadership and resources necessary to advance its influence in all parts of the world.¹

None of these things can be pursued in isolation. We do not know what ethical principles mean apart from our understanding of their consequences for policy and action. We do not know what ideas and vested interests we must oppose unless we have a diagnosis of the causes of our present social and environmental crises. We do not know how to organize ourselves into an effective international social movement unless we know what each community and nation will pledge to contribute. We cannot mobilize the political will to bring about the Great Transition unless we commit ourselves to one another as members of a mutually accountable citizen-led social movement that bears witness to the suffering of people and the planet and stands in solidarity with those who are risking their lives to heal it.

I am taking my cue here from the examples of the great religious and secular movements that have demonstrated their capacity to change the course of human history. As important as their universal ethical teachings is their capacity to nurture moral character in their members and inspire a sense of shared faith across the generations based on a prophetic diagnosis of the nature and sources of evil in the world and the specific ways humans can find personal and collective salvation.

I believe that the Great Transition Initiative would do a great service if we were to identify the movements that are the most significant bearers of the ethical foundations for the Great Transition—the movement for the Rights of Mother Earth, Pierre Calame’s Alliance for a United and Responsible World, the Earth Charter Initiative, among others—and engage in an international dialogue that submits them to the kind of critical evaluation as global change agents as I have briefly suggested here.

Endnotes

1. These are elaborated further in Peter Burdon, Klaus Bosselmann, and Kirsten Engel, *The Crisis in Global Ethics and the Future of Global Governance: Fulfilling the Promise of the Earth Charter* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2019).

About the Author



Ron Engel was a founder of the Ethics Working Group of the World Conservation Union and a core member of the international drafting committee for the Earth Charter. He has been a high school biology teacher, park ranger, community organizer, Unitarian Universalist minister, international environmental activist, university professor, and author. As Professor of Social Ethics at Meadville/Lombard Theological School (1970–2000) and lecturer at the Divinity School and College of the University of Chicago, he helped to pioneer the academic fields of environmental ethics and theology. He is the author of such books as *Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes*, *Ethics of Environment and Development: Global Challenge, International Response*, and *The Crisis of Global Ethics and the Future of Global Governance: Fulfilling the Promise of the Earth Charter*.



Ethical Leadership in the Civilization Rupture

Richard Falk

The theme of relating ethics to ecological sustainability is a crucial dimension of planetary viability for the peoples of the earth and even more so for the many species non-human beings that live together with humans throughout the world. The raging wildfires of Australia that have taken more than one billion animal lives should be viewed as an apocalyptic event although the lethal effects on human beings have been relatively minor, at least so far. Yet the Australian inferno is nevertheless a metaphor depicting a flaming future for humanity and its shared destiny with the whole of nature. Beyond this, the small number of direct human casualties totally discredits and ethically undermines the kind of anthropocentric worldview that has guided modernity at least from the time of the Industrial Revolution. What we can and must learn is that human activity cannot and should not be safeguarded at the expense of its natural surroundings, both for our sake and theirs. Although this might be obvious to the ecologically minded minority among us, it is not reflected in the behavioral patterns of either the public or private sectors of society, or the media, which remain in virtual denial of the structural impacts of human activity on global ecosystems, the central explanation for regarding our time as that of the Anthropocene.

In his opening essay, Brendan Mackey makes perceptive observations about the appropriate framework of shared values to address the unmet challenges of the Anthropocene. My concern is less with configuring the ethical framework than in providing political traction for the mounting dangers of catastrophic scope associated with the failure to deal effectively with such fundamental issues of ecological accommodation as global warming and diminishing biodiversity. What has become alarmingly evident is less the ethical gap than the failures of political leaders, private sector elites, and media moguls to act on the basis of scientific knowledge and longer-term interests.

My view is that it is quite widely known what should be done to achieve a transition to conditions of ecological equilibrium, but that such knowledge is not acted upon because of several imposing obstacles:

Short-termism: There is a troubling mismatch between the accountability cycles of political, financial, and corporate leaders and officials, rarely more than a few years, and the time horizons of ecological challenges that impinge catastrophically and, quite possibly, irreversibly, but are perceived, if at all, as posing insufficient immediate threats to justify expensive and controversial policy adjustments. Such a mismatch could be viewed as an “ethical” deficiency, but it is more generally understood as the link between time expectations with respect to political performance and time expectations relating to ecological adaptation.

Special interests: Reinforcing these short time horizons of policymakers are a variety of collective entities that are opposed to making adjustments because of cutting into profits or heightening economic and political risks. For instance, the importance of coal exports in Australia exerted influence on national politicians of the party in power not to restrict coal as a source of energy or to impose carbon emission controls.

Ideological and religious dogma: Capitalist thinking tends toward trusting markets, and distrusting states and public institutions; this makes it difficult to regulate the private sector in accord with the public interest, or even to clarify the public interest as understood by science and rationality. Likewise, some *fundamentalist* religious doctrines generally oppose taking steps that challenge the omnipotence of God or divine governance as expressions of *hubris*.

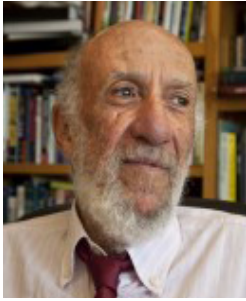
Emergency diversions: Wartime conditions, situations of political tension, and acute economic stress resulting from food insecurities or disease epidemics divert attention from the more abstract and remote threats of climate change or loss of biodiversity.

Technophilia: There is a widespread confidence among business leaders and politicians that sense that technology will provide solutions to ecological challenges when problematic effects reach a crisis stage.

Against this background, the Earth Charter is a helpful counter-ideological text that enlightens us about the ethical foundations of what should be and needs to be done to uphold planetary viability, but so far fails to take the indispensable next step, which is to depict the politics that might make these values operational on a sufficient scale as to meet the challenges and safeguard the human and non-human future of living together on one earth in a benevolent fashion. In this sense, the Earth Charter and kindred expressions of ecological worldviews have established an overall ethical consensus. Although as the comments in this forum confirm, there is much work to be done when it comes to refining the ethical consensus. This consensus has affected public opinion, as bolstered by such adverse experiences as extreme weather events, droughts, floods, fires, and mass migration, and yet we still lack a sufficient political will or atmosphere of urgency to address root causes of these Anthropocene challenges in a manner that would hasten attaining the goals of the GTI.

Depicting the ethical framework is useful, but what makes change happen on such a momentous scale has to be more transformative in spirit and substance, which depends on nothing less than what has sometimes been called a “second Axial Revolution.” Perhaps, a better formulation is to speak of the need for a “civilizational rupture,” the break with the expansionary and materialist vision of modernity and its replacement by an ecologically crafted civilization that is sensitive to the ecological limits and positive potentialities of the Anthropocene. Such an eco-political transformation of values postulates a radical civilizational future that is neither predictable nor achievable by normal procedures of advocacy and political agitation. We know a lot about what needs doing, but not very much about how to get it done. To exhibit urgency may catalyze a movement with transformative energy, and so all efforts to align with an earth-centered worldview can be considered as preparation for the hard work ahead to ensure species survival grounded on a revolutionary and a new ecological equilibrium.

About the Author



Richard Falk is Albert G. Milbank Professor Emeritus of International Law at Princeton University and Fellow of the Orfalea Center of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He directs the project on Global Climate Change, Human Security, and Democracy at UCSB and formerly served as director the North American group in the World Order Models Project. Between 2008 and 2014, Falk served as UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Occupied Palestine. He is the author or coauthor of many books, including *(Re)Imagining Humane Global Governance*, *Religion and Humane Global Governance*, *The Promise of World Order*, and *This Endangered Planet*.



Ethics and the Good Life

Roger Gottlieb

The Earth Charter has many strong points to recommend it: above all, a realization that human attitudes and actions towards the non-human have a moral, and not just an instrumental or cognitive, dimension. Likewise, there is the crucial assertion that these moral dimensions have deep ramifications for the way humans treat each other. Humanity is far from uniform in its power to determine environmental practices, nor homogenous in how different groups suffer from foolish and destructive environmental policies.

Therefore, any attempt to share and support the Earth Charter is, in my view, a Good Thing.

Here are some obstacles. The most important is that most people, for most of the time, do not believe that nature has moral value. Or if it does, that it does not have very much. Or if it has a lot, it does not have nearly as much as people. Despite the quite large and widespread teachings of virtually all dominant world religions on this score, environmental issues still take second, third, or fourth place behind poverty, gender, sexuality, immigration, war and peace, and—for far too many in first place—having the Right Beliefs about God or some pressing social issue.

Moreover, let us imagine that in the future a cultural transformation of great magnitude could occur, and the notion that nature has moral value—and an enormous amount of it—would become widespread. Let us take a close look at the world in the present and ask ourselves: now we all agree that people have moral value. But how are we treating each other? The obvious answer of “not very well” is supported by statistics on poverty, wealth inequality, needless wars, ethnic hatred, child abuse, violence against women, neglect of the elderly and disabled, the rising tide of fascism, government suppression of dissidents, and widespread efforts to subject

the population to addictions to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, mindless entertainment, and cell phones.

In short, do we have any confidence that any ethical teaching is capable of moving human behavior—or moving it for very long—towards morality?

Doubtful, at best.

Let us, however, take another tack.

What is the justification for the Earth Charter? Indeed, how can we justify any ethical code whatsoever? Religious appeals fall in the face of secularism and religious diversity. Secular systems tend to depend on questionable principles (act so that everyone else could act this way), essentially empty tautological directives (pursue the greatest happiness), claims that cannot be justified (we have “rights”), or psychology that presumes we can identify what forms of life make people happy (virtue theory).

If there were a rock-bottom foundation for morality, I suspect we would have found it now. That generation after generation of moral theorists have claimed to find it gives further credence to the idea that it simply is not findable.

But what if instead of justifying moral principles and values by appeal to something existing—God, human nature, conditions of rational assertion, etc.—we simply tried to describe, in as much detail as possible, what life would be like if people lived by these values and then see if people want that kind of world? For example, don’t take nature seriously as a moral subject, and you get more plastic than fish in the ocean, the biggest die-off of species in 70 million years, wildfires in Greenland and the Arctic, hundreds of billions of dollars of weather-related losses per year just in the US, the rainforest being razed for palm oil and soybeans, disastrous floods, etc.

Likewise, if we cut ourselves off from nature, we suffer from a variety of maladies psychologists now term “nature deficit disorder.” Obsessively looking at our phones produces anxiety, an epidemic of nearsightedness in adolescents, social uncertainty, and ever-increasing alienation from what is actually around us.

Looking at trees, birds, the ocean, clouds, flowers, and bees does none of these things. In short, our current form of life is unhealthy, dangerous, and depressing. Is that not a convincing argument?

Sadly, no. While, as an argument, it might be rock-solid, arguments—no matter how rational—have little effect on addicts. And one way to understand the globe's current malaise is as a combination of addictions: to power, wealth, distraction, pleasure, rage, and escape. To radically alter our relation to nature—and the consequences of that relation on fellow humans—we would have to get clean and sober. But addicts do not live for the long term; are incapable of facing the truth; and will lie, steal, and commit violence to support their habits. A casual glance at the morning news indicates just how addicted both the ruling classes (corporate and political elites) and the rest of us are.

However—and here I would offer a slight hope—no addict ever looked like she or he would ever recover, but some of them do. We have no idea what makes recovery possible. There is no bottom to hit, for, after all, you do not hit bottom until you stop digging.

Yet we do know that as a necessary condition of recovery, the addict must come to believe that another form of life is at least possible. And thus the importance of teaching the values of the Earth Charter, as well as reminding all of us that there have been bright environmental moments in the last decades: the Montreal Protocols, which eliminated the threat of ozone-depleting CFCs; joint efforts by Israelis and Palestinians on water pollution; small group efforts to save this or that endangered species; millions of children who see the truth and are demanding that their elders respond.

Is any of this enough? Not, for me, to give hope. But, at least, to give me a little courage to carry on.

About the Author



Roger Gottlieb is a professor of philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and the author or editor of 21 books and over 150 essays on political philosophy, religious environmentalism, environmental ethics, the Holocaust, and contemporary spirituality. He has won book prizes for fiction (*Engaging Voices*) and for *Spirituality: What it is and Why it Matters*. His most recent book is *Morality and the Environmental Crisis*.



Action Is the Path to a New Ethics

Gwendolyn Hallsmith

Brendan Mackey's call for an ethical transition informed by the Earth Charter needs more than a formal procedure, an international institutional base, and strong, credible leadership. The Earth Charter had all this twenty years ago. It had a UN mandate coming out of the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, three high-level international leaders, and a process that engaged people from all walks of life all over the world. Those of us who participated in the Johannesburg Summit in 2002, where the hope was that the Earth Charter would be adopted by the UN as a counterpart to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but was not, saw that these elements were not enough to effect the change we all wanted at the time: an ethical transition in international law and practice.

Where can we find the driving force for the ethical transition? Some, like Mary Evelyn Tucker, would say world religions, pointing out how the Earth Charter principles are in alignment with religious tenets and wisdom traditions around the world. But the capacity of the world's religions to provide moral direction and inspiration for a flourishing community of life is questionable. Where I live now in rural Vermont, this capacity is a bit higher than other places I have lived—Central Asia, Europe, Canada, urban US—but it is still tiny when compared to the economic forces at work shaping people's worldviews and lives.

For hope, I would turn toward the climate justice movement. The diverse calls for climate justice articulate a new vision for society, one that unites the Earth Charter's links between ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, non-violence, and peace. They also call everything into question—our culture, our assumptions about technology, our views about “normal” consumer values, monetary systems that reinforce inequality and drive growth, industrial dominance, agriculture, and centralized, white, male power.

Inspired by the need for climate action, the new generation of young people are now challenging their forebears in ways that have never happened before. The rise of Greta Thunberg and her clear call for ecological integrity linked to social and economic justice has resonated with millions around the world. People are waking up.

But is waking up enough? Does human action follow ethics, or do ethics follow action? A call for an ethical transition would seem to imagine that if we could somehow get lots of people to line up behind something akin to the Earth Charter 2.0, this would change things, even when most human institutions are still working with and for the systems driving us to destruction.

Don't get me wrong: I love engaging people from all over the world in the essential discussions about values and ethics. If Brendan Mackey's vision of a renewed Earth Charter materializes, count me in. I also think those of us who resonate with the Earth Charter need to look more critically at our own cultural assumptions, and our basic economic systems, and then look for the structures we can create for human interaction that are aligned with Earth Charter principles. Action to change systems might be the first thing to do if we hope vast populations will ever ascribe to new ethical principles. Adopting a principle to eradicate poverty, for example, is a start, but we need to empower all people to rise up and take their rightful place as children of the Earth. We need more action. The Green New Deal's link to action and systems change in the context of the climate justice framework could be Earth Charter 2.0.

About the Author



Gwendolyn Hallsmith has over thirty years of experience working with municipal, regional, and state government in the United States and internationally. She is the author of six books on community resilience and sustainable economics. She founded Vermonters for a New Economy in 2012, and is currently working on legislation for a Vermont State Bank. She lives in an ecovillage in Cabot, Vermont, called the Headwaters Garden and Learning Center, where she and her husband write topical songs about the new economy for their small musical group called The New Economistas. She has a Master's degree in Public Policy from Brown University and studied theology at the Andover Newton Theological School.



Justifying Universal Ethics

Joel Kassiola

Brendan Mackey's advocacy of "normative ethics based on universal values and principles presumed to be shared by all people, nations, and cultures" is an essential component to any transitional strategy beyond the flawed and dangerous framework that now prevails globally today as it has for millennia in the West. His essay deserves praise for articulating a position seldom expressed in the voluminous writings on the environmental crisis: the fundamental importance of universal ethics. This is crucial to any contemporary discussion of the environmental crisis as well as any proposals to address it, such as the Earth Charter.

However, despite the essay's focus on universal normative ethics, it seems surprisingly bereft of the necessary component of ethical discourse: ethical argumentation, i.e., the making of ethical claims and the provision of reasoned evidence for their rational support. Without it, Mackey's essay risks reinforcing the misguided stereotype that ethics consists of platitudes with little specific practical relevance in the real world where people live and policymakers render decisions.

We will not achieve any Great Transition merely by asserting the abstract need for universal moral guidance: one must get down to specific arguments for such guidance. For example, there is a need for alternative worldviews because the presupposed worldviews of human-centered ethics with human supremacy over all other living species and natural ecosystems needs to be criticized and replaced with a sounder and more sustainable foundational environmental ethic (e.g., I prescribe the Confucian tradition).

It is clear we need ethics in environmentalism today. Hegemonic anthropocentrism is mistaken in its arrogant human chauvinism and is the major cause for the environmental crises we face. Universal ethical frameworks are desirable, as Mackey contends, but what matters is not just

their abstract and general level of discourse and application—universalism—but their specific content. The anthropocentric belief that the human species is both separate and superior to the rest of nature results in the belief that the entire planet's resources are ours to exploit. This universal claim is fatally misconceived and possibly lethal to our species and planet if its acceptance continues.

The most valuable sentence I found in Mackey's essay from the ethical point of view occurs toward the end of the essay: "If the promise of the Earth Charter is to be realized, a platform is needed...for new universal norms and principles to guide our responses." This position seems quite similar to several such calls for a new "story," paradigm, or worldview.¹ I have tried in my own work to examine the values of Confucianism, most recently, the cosmology of an eleventh-century Neo-Confucian. Therefore, I wholeheartedly agree with Mackey's call for a new ethical framework, but the specific nature of the Earth Charter must be explained and evidence provided for it, not just its universal status. All ethical claims are understood to be universal.²

In conclusion, I laud Brendan Mackey for prescribing the importance of ethics and recommending the Earth Charter. However, to be rationally convincing and to have an impact in the real world, a persuasive ethical argument must precede any discussion of how the Earth Charter was created, how it is to be interpreted, and how it is to be implemented worldwide. The absence of argumentation reinforces the prevailing view of ethics' irrelevance to the urgent environmental challenges confronting us, delaying further the desperately needed transformation of our global fallacious, arrogant, and self-destructive anthropocentrism and ruination of the planet.

Endnotes

1. For one example, see, *Thomas Berry's The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988).

2. See "the universal perspective" as one of four required "elements of ethics" in Lewis Vaughn, *Beginning Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2014), 19–20.

About the Author



Joel Kassiola is Professor of Political Science and a former dean at San Francisco State University. A leading scholar in the field of environmental political theory, he has focused upon China's environmental crisis and proposing Confucian Green Theory. He is the author of *The Death of Industrial Civilization* and *Explorations in Environmental Political Theory*, and a co-editor of *China's Environmental Crisis*. He is currently Co-Editor of the Series on Environmental Politics and Theory for Palgrave Macmillan.



Embracing Interconnectedness

Jeremy Lent

It is of the utmost importance to establish the right framework of values for the deep transformation of civilization that is needed. As I have laid out in *The Patterning Instinct*, different cultures have constructed vastly different systems of values, and those values have shaped history. Similarly, the values we choose today as a society will shape our future. The stakes for getting it right could hardly be higher.¹

In recent decades, neoliberalism has established a dominant pseudo-ethical regime based on a flawed notion of untrammelled, market-based individual freedom. Our overriding task is to substitute this with an ethic of shared responsibility and interdependence. We need a solid, rigorous foundation for this ethic. Where do we find it?

Too much of the conversation on ethics focuses on binaries. But binaries simply encourage different camps to put up barricades against each other. We must move beyond binaries to a truly integrated ethical framework—one that incorporates the rational and intuitive, the scientific and the spiritual.

Fortunately, in recent decades, the combination of complexity science, evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and systems thinking has given us a platform for the kind of integration we need. Recognizing an evolutionary basis for values does not mean falling prey to the reductionist determinism of outmoded theorists such as Richard Dawkins, whose “selfish gene” myth has been superseded by modern evolutionary biology.²

The major evolutionary transitions of life on Earth have, in fact, been characterized by increases in cooperation, the most recent of which was the emergence of hominids. Facing perilous savannah conditions, our ancestors discovered that, through collaboration, they could protect

and feed themselves far more effectively. They evolved moral emotions, such as a sense of fairness, cooperation, and altruism, which enabled them—in what has been called a “reverse dominance hierarchy”—to collaboratively restrain the occasional dangerously aggressive male driven by the atavistic impulse for domination that we see in other primates.³

These moral emotions formed the basis of the morality that characterizes our species.

Sophisticated tests have shown that, faced with a choice, our initial impulse is to cooperate, and only after time to reflect do selfish behaviors emerge. In various experiments, prelinguistic infants show a rudimentary sense of fairness, justice, empathy, compassion, and generosity, along with a clear ability to distinguish between kind and cruel actions. Morality is intrinsic to the human condition.⁴

So why do we live in a world filled with endless examples of outrageous immorality, where dangerous aggressive males still wield power? With the rise of agriculture and sedentism, the power balance shifted to those who succeeded in establishing hierarchical dominance, leading eventually to the rise of patriarchal societies that rewarded machismo and violence—what Riane Eisler has termed “domination systems.”⁵

The world history of the past millennia mostly chronicles conflicts between different domination systems, one of which—European civilization—eventually became globally dominant in the past few centuries, forcing its unique dualistic cosmology on those it conquered. This is the worldview that most people now take for granted—one based on separation and domination, seeing humans as selfish, rational competitors, defined by their individuality, utterly separate from a desacralized nonhuman nature that has been relegated to a mere mechanistic resource without intrinsic value.

This worldview is a far cry from the shared ethical basis of cross-cultural traditions throughout history, and has been comprehensively invalidated by modern scientific findings. Instead, systems science confirms the insights shared by wisdom teachings across the ages: that we are all intrinsically interconnected. The deep interpenetration of all aspects of reality—what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “interbeing”—must be at the heart of an ethical framework for political and cultural transformation.

Our expression of morality is, to a very large extent, a function of our identity. If you see yourself as an isolated individual, your values will accordingly lead you to the pursuit of your own happiness at the expense of others. If you identify with your community, your values will emphasize the welfare of the group. When you recognize yourself as part of nature, you will automatically feel drawn to nurture and protect the natural world.

Over the past several centuries, even as European imperialism ravaged the rest of the world, there was also a gradual expansion of identity, from the parochial to a broader vision of shared humanity, which has led to what Martin Luther King famously referred to as the “moral arc” bending toward justice. This has inspired concepts such as inalienable human rights and led to ever-widening attempts to legislate moral justice into national and international codes of conduct. The Earth Charter stands as an exemplary model of this kind of expansive moral vision.

However, in our current predicament, facing impending ecological catastrophe and the potential of civilizational collapse, we must ask whether this moral expansion is a case of too little, too late. What can be done to catalyze it and redirect our terrifying trajectory? Is it possible to develop a cross-cultural global moral vision for humanity that extends to all life on Earth, and could inspire a comprehensive transition toward economic justice and ecological regeneration?

While those of us enculturated in the West have had to rediscover our interconnectedness, traditional cultures have maintained the deeply embedded principles that characterized core human morality from earliest times. Comanche social activist LaDonna Harris has identified four central values known as the four R’s that are shared by indigenous peoples around the world, which together affirm the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation: Relationship, Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Redistribution. They each pertain to different types of obligation that inform a person’s life. Relationship is a kinship obligation, recognizing value not just in family but in “all our relations” including animals, plants, and the living Earth. Responsibility is the community obligation, identifying the imperative to nurture and care for those relations. Reciprocity is a cyclical obligation to balance what is given and taken; and Redistribution is the obligation to share what one possesses—not just material wealth, but one’s skills, time, and energy.⁶

Other sources of wisdom, such as Taoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism, each offer unique teachings into the ethical implications of the fundamental unity of all life. “Everything from...husband, wife, and friends, to mountains, rivers...birds, beasts, and plants, all should be truly loved in order that the unity may be reached,” declared Neo-Confucian sage Wang Yangming.

Our crucial task is to incorporate these principles of traditional wisdom into an integrated system of values that can redirect humanity away from catastrophe, and toward a flourishing future. One where our shared identity expands beyond parochial boundaries to include, not just all humanity, but all sentient beings, and the vibrancy of the entire living Earth. Ultimately, it is our values that guide our actions—and will shape our future.

Endnotes

1. Jeremy Lent, *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2017).
2. Patrick Bateson, Nancy Cartwright, John Dupré, Kevin Laland, and Denis Noble, “New Trends in Evolutionary Biology: Biological, Philosophical and Social Science Perspectives,” *Royal Society | Interface Focus* 7, no. 5 (2017).
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4. Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2013).
5. Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
6. La Donna Harris and Jacqueline Wasilewski, “Indigeneity, an Alternative Worldview: Four R's (Relationship, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Redistribution) Vs. Two P's (Power and Profit). Sharing the Journey Towards Conscious Evolution,” *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 21 (2004): 489–503.

About the Author



Jeremy Lent is an author whose writings investigate the patterns of thought that have led our civilization to its current crisis of sustainability. His award-winning book *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity's Search for Meaning* explores the way humans have made meaning from the cosmos from hunter-gatherer times to the present day. His forthcoming book, *The Web of Meaning: Integrating Science and Traditional Wisdom to Find Our Place in the Universe*, weaves together findings from modern science with insights from Buddhism, Taoism, and indigenous wisdom, to offer a worldview of connectedness that could enable humanity to flourish on the Earth harmoniously into the future.



The Earth Charter Legacy

Steven Rockefeller

First of all, I want to thank Brendan Mackey for his excellent opening essay on the urgent need for global ethics and the Earth Charter and his call for “a renewed global ethics dialogue” with a focus on updating the Earth Charter vision. Mackey was among the most deeply engaged members of the drafting committee, and he served as the committee’s chief science adviser. My comments are focused on his call for “a renewed global ethics dialogue.”

One of the most significant developments since World War II has been the emergence through international, cross-cultural dialogue of a growing vision of widely shared, fundamental values set forth in international charters and declarations. It is vitally important to the advance of justice, sustainability, and peace that the dialogue on universal spiritual and ethical values be expanded and deepened for all the reasons Brendan and others have cited. The Earth Charter is both a product of and contribution to this dialogue, and it can be used to promote the ongoing conversation. However, the idea of making changes in the text of the Earth Charter itself would not be advisable. The existing text has been endorsed by over 7,000 organizations worldwide and has been printed in numerous books and brochures and appears on various websites. Making changes after twenty years could create much confusion about just what text constitutes the official Earth Charter and about how past endorsements are related to some new altered text.

In addition, Maurice Strong, Kamla Chowdry, Wangari Maathai, and other members of the Commission have died, and given this situation, it is very unlikely that the remaining members of the Commission would feel it to be appropriate to authorize alterations of the text. At a drafting committee meeting early in 2000, Parvez Hassan, chair of the IUCN Commission on

Environmental Law, made a critical point urging the committee to keep in mind that “there is no such thing as a perfect document and every document has its time, and the time for the Earth Charter is the year 2000.” The Earth Charter was a declaration for the millennium, and it is best to let it stand as such. Furthermore, its major message remains profoundly relevant.¹

While supporting Mackey’s call for renewed commitment to the development of global ethics, I also recognize the force of the argument that we know the basic ethical challenges facing humanity and what must be done and the most urgent need right now is transformative political leadership and far-reaching economic reform that secures equity, justice, and sustainability. Given this situation, one option that could be pursued in the short term with regard to updating the vision in the Earth Charter is to assemble a small group of international law experts and scientists and charge them with the task of identifying any new international law principles and scientific research relevant to the purpose and strategic goals of the Earth Charter. Earth Charter International could consider organizing this project.

In this regard, hundreds of essays and a number of books have been written on the Earth Charter. A bibliography covering most of this literature is available on the Earth Charter International website maintained by the ECI Secretariat based at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. In this extensive literature, there are accounts of how the Earth Charter came to be and how it has been promoted and used in all regions of the world. There is also a growing body of commentary on the text. A report on new international law principles and science relevant to the Earth Charter would be a valuable contribution to the commentary on the Earth Charter and to any larger, ongoing conversations about global ethics and the Earth Charter. The time will certainly come when a new global dialogue like the inclusive, participatory, worldwide process that produced the first Earth Charter should be undertaken.

Endnotes

1. For a further introduction to the Earth Charter and more information on the drafting process, I recommend two of my essays: “Ecological and Social Responsibility: The Making of the Earth Charter” in Barbara Darling-Smith, ed., *Responsibility* (Lexington Books, 2007) and “Crafting Principles for the Earth Charter” in Peter Blaze Corcoran, ed., *A Voice for Earth: American Writers Respond to the Earth Charter* (University of Georgia Press, 2008). For a further discussion of the Earth Charter principles and links between the Earth Charter, the UN SDGs, and *Laudato Si’*, see my *Democratic Equality, Economic Inequality, and the Earth Charter* (San José, Costa Rica: Earth Charter International, 2015).

About the Author



Steven Rockefeller is a Professor Emeritus of Religion at Middlebury College, where he also served as dean of the College. He received his Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his PhD from Columbia University. He is the author of *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (1991) and the co-editor of two books of essays, *The Christ and the Bodhisattva* (1987) and *Spirit and Nature: Why the Environment is a Religious Issue* (1992). He has played a leading role in the drafting and promotion of the Earth Charter, which is a declaration of global interdependence with fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Active in the field of philanthropy, he is a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, an international foundation that he chaired from 1998 to 2006.



Enough Words, More Actions!

Roz Savage

The Earth Charter may well be showing its age in places (aren't we all?), and I can understand the eagerness of experts around the world to "participate in a renewed global ethics dialogue, and with the potential to empower the Earth Charter and its vision for the great transition we so desperately need." I am sure this would be a fascinating and personally rewarding enterprise. However, my personal view is that we already have enough charters and declarations, Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, to last us for the foreseeable future. There is an old English proverb that "fine words butter no parsnips," roughly translated as "pretty words are all very good, but they don't get the job done." The danger is that we confuse the creation of yet another aspirational statement with actually doing something.

To my mind, we are still trying to solve the problems from within the same system that created them. I am thinking particularly of the neoliberal capitalist system. Much has been written on this already, which I don't need to repeat here. Charlie Munger says it best: "Show me the incentive and I will show you the outcome." As long as the incentive is to externalize costs and to exploit natural and human resources as cheaply as possible, the outcome will always be environmental degradation and affronts to human dignity. Although there is an encouraging increase in conscious capitalism, overall the system continues to pull us in the opposite direction from our stated intentions.

This is the crucial decade for action on climate change and biodiversity loss. We may well be too late already to avoid many catastrophic consequences. I wholeheartedly agree with Brendan Mackey that we "cannot rely on the notion that good will inevitably prevail because it

is divinely pre-ordained or inevitable given a rising tide of cosmic consciousness.” We do not live in a Hollywood movie, and it is by no means certain that the good guys will win.

I also agree that we need to “build systems that are supportive of the greater community of life and the interdependence of people and nature,” and this is where I feel motivated to put my energy. What we need, to echo Donella Meadows, is to transcend our existing paradigm. We need a new story about what it means to be human—something simple and accessible—and to design a new economic system that embodies that story. This economic system does not necessarily need to replace capitalism, but it does need to provide a viable and attractive alternative that enables people to meet their needs while supporting the ethical values that we say we want. There is exciting work already happening with complementary currencies all over the world.

Rather than taking several years to appoint a suitable chair organization, design a drafting process, create and sign off on the final version, and achieve ratification (years that we do not have), I would rather put my energy into implementing systems—economic, and thereafter by implication, also political and technological—that enshrine and incentivize the worthy ethical values that have been well articulated in all the declarations, charters, and goals already in existence.

About the Author



Roz Savage is the only woman to row solo across the world’s “big three” oceans: Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian. She is a United Nations Climate Hero, a trained presenter for the Climate Reality Project, an Athlete Ambassador for 350.org, and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. She was appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire for services to the environment. She is on the board of Adventurers and Scientists for Conservation, and a Blue Ambassador for the UK-based BLUE Project. She writes, speaks, and lectures on sustainability, courage, resilience, and change.



On Rights and Responsibilities

Kathryn Sikkink

Brendan Mackey draws an interesting parallel between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the various declarations that have sought to establish a similar shared ethics in the environmental areas. I welcome his encouragement to reconsider one of the most important of these, the Earth Charter of 2000. Yet, it would seem that the Earth Charter has not yet played a similar role as the UDHR, nor does it hold the same place in the eyes of environmental activists as the UDHR does for human rights activists. I don't understand the reason for this, but it appears that environmental activists may be less committed to such soft law declarations and charters. For a 2016 article, Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Brad L. LeVeck, and David G. Victor interviewed 243 NGO activists, about half from human rights NGOs and half from environmental NGOs. The human rights activists thought the UDHR is just as powerful a tool for activists as the binding treaty protecting civil and political rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). By contrast, the non-binding Rio Declaration had not yet achieved the same status in the environmental community, who believe that binding treaties are a more powerful tool for activists than non-binding declarations.¹ The authors did not ask about the Earth Charter, but I doubt that it would have elicited a more positive response.

One possible explanation for these differences is that every right in the UDHR was later incorporated into hard law conventions, from the ICCPR, to the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and many of the general rights in the UDHR were further elaborated in specific treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Women's Convention (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are even some rights that were not imagined yet in the UDHR that have now

been embodied in treaties of their own, including the Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities. Human rights activists feel a particular attachment to the UDHR because it was so productive in leading to many other specific treaties protecting rights. The Earth Charter does not appear to have been productive in the same way.

A second point I wanted to make in response to Mackey's essay has to do with the section of the Earth Charter focused on universal responsibility. It says that to realize its aspirations, "we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. . . . Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world." Although the Earth Charter speaks of responsibilities of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions, as Mackey points out, it "does not specify what particular responsibilities fall upon which actors and sectors of society."

These themes echo some that I have tried to address in my recently book *The Hidden Face of Rights: Toward a Politics of Responsibility* (Yale University Press, 2020). In it, I argue for more robust norms and practices of responsibility to accompany our rights. For example, to address environmental crises, it is necessary not only to emphasize each individual's right to a clean environment but also the obligations of states, corporations, institutions, and individuals to protect the environment. Although much attention has correctly focused on the need for states and corporations to limit emissions in order to slow climate change, other institutions and individuals must complement state and corporate actions by working to decrease their own carbon footprints.

My purpose is not to argue against rights as an approach to addressing environmental or any other issues. But if we really believe that future generations have a right to a stable climate, we also know that it is insufficient to insist that only states or corporations have responsibilities. All of us connected to the structural injustice of climate change need to exercise our collective responsibilities.

The Trump Administration has completely abdicated any responsibility with regard to climate change and environmental protection. Nevertheless, various state governments, municipal governments, corporations, universities, and individuals in the United States have affirmed their

commitment to the Paris Agreement and continue to diminish carbon emissions despite the federal government's noncompliance.

I draw on Iris Young's idea of forward-looking responsibility and her social connection model of responsibility to think about responsibilities for climate change. If many more of us did this, over a lifetime, personal emissions reductions in themselves could make a substantial contribution to slowing climate change.² In addition to their actual impact, these efforts could have "communicative value" that encourages others to follow our example.³ In this way, our individual emission reductions, which in isolation have little effect on overall emission reductions, may "trigger—more effective and efficient—collective types of action."⁴ Our responsibility is thus both to act individually and to make sure this action connects to broader efforts to organize collectively.⁵

There is a common belief that individuals can do little to contribute to the fight against climate change. My research and that of other scholars about how social change happens reveals that norm change is often led by individual and institutional norm entrepreneurs, whose actions are essential to pressure for and coalesce changes in norms and practices by a wider range of actors.

The Earth Charter's call for an ethic of responsibility is even more relevant today than it was twenty years ago. And today we have more information about what individuals and institutions can do to exercise that responsibility. A new study of thirty-nine peer-reviewed papers, government reports, and web-based programs outlined the top ways individuals can reduce their carbon footprints.⁶ Based on their research, the authors recommend four high-impact actions: having one less child, living car-free, avoiding airplane travel, and eating a plants-based diet. These seem radical, but if you read the article carefully, you find that avoiding just one round-trip transatlantic flight a year is the third most effective way to reduce emissions, after having fewer children and living car-free for a year. We all need to think about that the next time we plan an international airplane trip.

Endnotes

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4. Marion Hourdequin, "Climate Change and Individual Responsibility: A Reply to Johnson," *Environmental Values* 20, no. 2 (2011): 157–162.
5. Simo Kyllönen, "Climate Change, No-Harm Principle, and Moral Responsibility of Individual Emitters," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35, no. 4 (2018): 7.
6. Seth Wynes and Kimberly A Nicholas, "The Climate Mitigation Gap: Education and Government Recommendations Miss the Most Effective Individual Actions," *Environmental Research Letters* 12, no. 7 (July 1, 2017): 1.

About the Author



Kathryn Sikkink is the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and the Carol K. Pforzheimer Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Sikkink works on international norms and institutions, transnational advocacy networks, the impact of human rights law and policies, and transitional justice. Her publications include *Evidence for Hope: Making Human Rights Work in the 21st Century*; *The Justice Cascade: How Human Rights Prosecutions are Changing World Politics*; and *The Persistent Power of Human Rights: From Commitment to Compliance* (co-edited with Thomas Risse and Stephen Ropp). She holds a PhD in political science from Columbia University. Sikkink has been a Fulbright Scholar in Argentina and a Guggenheim fellow.



What World Religions Teach Us

Mary Evelyn Tucker

I am indebted to Brendan Mackey for raising valuable issues about the contribution of the Earth Charter to a global ethics for our time. I am also grateful for the thoughtful comments his article has provoked. My response focuses on how world religions can complement this process, recognizing the limitations of religions as well as their capacity to support transformative moral change, as in abolition in England, the civil rights movement in the United States, and anti-apartheid in South Africa.

The litany of environmental, climate, and development problems is well known. Now more than ever, we are being pressed to see the linkages between environment and people, between healthy ecosystems and healthy social systems, between climate protection and poverty alleviation. We need truly interdisciplinary approaches and systemic thinking that includes more stakeholders, as many GTI commentators have noted. Our challenge is to create not simply low-carbon societies but whole communities, where humans are not recklessly exploiting nature for material gain, but rather recognizing their profound dependence on the larger community of life. In this spirit, unrestrained economic growth needs to be halted and effective governance needs to be enacted. And new ethical indicators of “progress” need to be developed.

These indicators are the central concerns of the Earth Charter for the integration of ecological integrity, justice, and peace. They correspond to six key “values for human-Earth flourishing” shared by world religions. These include reverence, respect, restraint, redistribution, responsibility, and renewal. These values were first identified in a conference series we organized at Harvard on World Religions and Ecology from 1996 to 1998, at which Steven Rockefeller (among others)

presented. The Earth Charter in its drafting stage was included in each of the conferences. John Grim and I expanded on these values in *Ecology and Religion* (Island Press, 2014).

The conferences highlighted viable human-Earth relations in scripture, in ritual, and in ethics. Over 800 scholars participated and ten volumes were published by Harvard. The Forum on Religion and Ecology was formed at the culminating conference at the United Nations in 1998. It is now based at Yale, where a major [website](#) was created to assist research, education, and outreach in this area. In the last twenty-five years, a new field of study has emerged in colleges and seminaries, and a new force for change has arisen within religions communities.

Statements on the environment, on climate change, and on eco-justice have been released by leaders from different world religions and indigenous traditions. Many religious groups cite the Earth Charter. The Pope's encyclical *Laudato Si* is a major document in bringing together eco-justice concerns. The Earth Charter is referenced in the encyclical. While religions have their problematic dimensions, including intolerance, dogmatism, and fundamentalism, they also have served as wellsprings of wisdom, as sources of moral inspiration, and as containers of transforming ritual practices.

The key components of the Earth Charter are (1) cosmological context, (2) ecological integrity, (3) social equity, (4) economic justice, and (5) democracy, non-violence, and peace. These six components of a sustainable future have their counterparts in the values for human-Earth flourishing that are shared among the world's religions.

Cosmological Context

All cultures have been grounded in the stories they tell regarding the nature of the universe, the evolution of the Earth and of life, and the destiny of humans in this context. These cosmological stories provide accounts of the creation and evolution of life and the purpose of humans. As humans are currently trying to navigate their way between scientific accounts of evolution and the multiple religious stories of creation, the Charter articulates a broad, simple, and inclusive sensibility that Earth is our home, our dwelling place within the larger cosmos.

This enlarged perspective of home may be a critical foundation for articulating a future that is both sustaining and flourishing. The Charter recognizes that we are part of a large family of life, including not only other humans but also other species. The interdependent quality of the Earth community is celebrated along with the fact that the conditions for life have been evolving for billions of years: “Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe. Earth, our home, is alive with a unique community of life. The forces of nature make existence a demanding and uncertain adventure, but Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution.”

Thus to speak of the broadest context for the flourishing of bio-social systems, we need to be reminded of the cosmological, evolutionary story of life’s emergence. The religious response to this is one of reverence, a quality shared by many scientists who are deeply inspired by their study of nature from cells to galaxies, enhanced now by powerful microscopes and telescopes. The intricacy and complexity of life is valued from both a spiritual and a scientific perspective. Awe and wonder become expressed through the shared experience of reverence. The [*Journey of the Universe*](#) film and book reflect this process.

Ecological Integrity

The broad context for a sustaining and flourishing future from the Earth Charter is preserving ecological health and integrity. Without such a basis for healthy ecosystems, there can be no long-term basis for the continuity of human life. It is expressed succinctly in the Preamble as follows: “The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clear air.”

The response of religious communities to this call for biological protection is the principle of respect for the rich diversity of life and the ecosystems that support life. Without such respect, environmental exploitation will continue, and we may irreversibly damage the ability of ecosystems to renew themselves. This is further spelled out in the Charter as protecting and restoring Earth’s ecosystems; preventing harm through the precautionary principle; adopting effective patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction; and advancing the study of ecological sustainability.

Social and Economic Justice

The next section of the Charter highlights social and economic justice, another key concern of the world's religions. The religious virtues of restraint in use of resources, as well as redistribution of wealth through charitable means, complement the Charter's principles. All of the world's religions encourage moderation in personal behavior as well as in the accumulation or use of material goods. In addition, the world's religions express a strong concern for the suffering of the poor and for inequality between the wealthy and those in need. Charitable giving is valued as a fundamental religious act.

The Charter calls for poverty eradication, equitable development, gender fairness, and non-discrimination regarding minorities and indigenous people. Thus justice is seen as balance of ecological, economic, and social factors. The term that many of the religions are using to describe this is "eco-justice," where biological and human health are seen as indispensable to one another. Indeed, preserving ecological integrity and protecting social and economic justice will require an integrated understanding of human-Earth relations.

In addition to restraint and redistribution, a broadened sense of ecological virtue is required. Women who do so much unpaid work to sustain their families, especially in developing countries, need to be valued and respected. The same applies for other minorities and for indigenous peoples who have preserved valuable environmental knowledge in many parts of the world. While the religions still have a way to go in recognizing the dignity and value of women and the communities of indigenous peoples, some progress is being made in this regard.

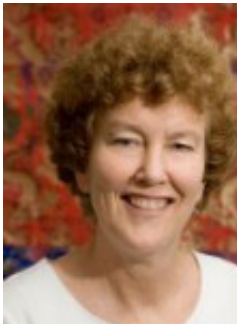
Democracy, Non-violence, and Peace

Finally, the Earth Charter recognizes that democracy, non-violence, and peace are necessary ingredients for a sustaining and flourishing future. From the perspective of the religious communities, democracy requires a fundamental sense of responsibility to future generations of the community of life — human and more than human. Non-violence and peace encourage the renewal of inner and outer peace, something that religious communities have tried to foster for millennia. Spiritual practices such as prayer and contemplation, yoga and tai ch'i, ritual and rites of passage have been developed to foster peace and non-violence for individuals and communities.

Of course, it should be noted that non-violence has not always been practiced, but it is one of the reasons why Gandhi, Tolstoy, and Martin Luther King are so widely admired. The principles in the section of the Earth Charter are strengthening democratic institutions, promoting sustainability education, respecting animals, and promoting a culture of non-violence and peace.

In conclusion, this integration of the principles of the Earth Charter with the virtues for human-Earth flourishing of the world's religions provides a unique synergy for rethinking a sustainable future. The capacity of the world's religions to provide moral direction and inspiration for a flourishing community of life is significant. The potential of the Earth Charter to create an ethical framework for sustainable programs and practices is considerable. Together, they may provide a comprehensive ethical grounding for creating a common and shared future.

About the Author



Mary Evelyn Tucker is a Senior Lecturer and Research Scholar at Yale University, where she has appointments in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies as well as the Divinity School and the Department of Religious Studies. She teaches in the joint MA program in religion and ecology and directs the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale with her husband, John Grim. From 1997 to 2000, she served on the International Earth Charter Drafting Committee. She has authored and edited numerous books on Asian religions, the intersection between religion and ecology, and the work of Thomas Berry, and is the co-creator of a multi-media project called Journey of the Universe, which includes an Emmy award-winning film. She received her PhD from Columbia University in Japanese Confucianism.



Author's Response



Response to Comments

Brendan Mackey

Let me begin by thanking everyone who took the time to read my essay “Toward a Great Ethics Transition: The Earth Charter at Twenty” and send in a written response. I was inspired by the insights shared and encouraged that so many appreciate the significance of the topic being addressed—the central role of ethics to the Great Transition.

Some of the contributions discussed ethics as a noun (as in a statement of ethical values and principles of which the Earth Charter is an example) while others were more concerned with ethics as a verb (the act of engaging in moral reasoning to determine the right or wrong of a given situation). All ethics (noun)—by definition, I would argue—are the products of ethics (verb), and in my essay I was suggesting the value of any ethic is in the moral work it enables us to do. Thus, only by applying the Earth Charter principles in real world situations can we assess their validity and currency. The same is true, of course, for any ethic.

Mary Evelyn Tucker underscores the importance that world religions and religious leaders have to play in the ongoing development and application of Earth ethics. Religious leaders and faith traditions contributed to the drafting of the Earth Charter and have been among its biggest champions. Such cross-tradition cooperation can help maintain the balance between universalism and pluralism and ward off the dogmatism that Richard Falk warns can be an obstacle

As my PhD was in environmental biogeography, and my current research focuses on the role of natural forests in Earth system processes and the impacts on them of human commercial activities, I was particularly pleased to read the contributions highlighting the co-evolutionary

relationship humans have with the greater community of life and Earth (e.g., those of J. Baird Callicott and Jeremy Lent). The current climate change emergency—the result of burning fossil fuel for energy, along with deforestation and degradation—illustrates this with a growing intensity. And let us not forget that the coronavirus health emergency is also a product of the co-evolutionary relationships between humans, other species, and planetary environmental conditions. Nowhere is our human hubris more apparent than in thinking our culture and technology have enabled us to step outside evolutionary processes and to be immune from the consequences of natural selection. Humanity's future and survival is very much tied to the health of our planet. And for this reason, I argue the Great Transition needs an ethic which is an Earth ethic.

Kathryn Sikkink noted the failure of the Earth Charter to achieve a level of recognition and hard law success comparable to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That was not for lack of trying, as Steven Rockefeller reminds us. Drafters and supporters of the Earth Charter had attempted to have it recognized in the Johannesburg Declaration, the main outcome of the World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002; however, a reference to the Earth Charter in the draft negotiating text was removed at the final hour. At least one national government allegedly objected to principle 16c, i.e., “Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration,” on the basis that they reserved the right to pre-emptive military action and interventions that require an offensive capability. This anecdote serves to remind us of the powerful hold individual states and military interests retain over international relations and the challenge the military-industrial complex presents to the Great Transition, a point alluded to by Luis Cabrera.

The Earth Charter, however, has been endorsed by UNESCO, including adoption of a resolution at the recent Fortieth General Conference of UNESCO that reaffirmed the importance of the Earth Charter as an ethical framework for sustainable development and encouraged Member States to use the Earth Charter in the processes of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), in particular in the implementation of the new ESD implementation framework for 2030. This motion was presented by the Government of Mexico with the support of Jordan to the 207th Executive Board of UNESCO in October 2019.

A number of contributors made the case for one or other philosophical “grundnorm” upon which a truly sustainable society could be based, with some arguing that the Earth Charter remains tied to a system of norms that is inherently incapable of supporting the Great Transition. This is an important point because, among other things, it raises the question of whether a society can only undertake a Great Transition if everyone agrees upon the moral reasoning behind a given value statement and principle. A presupposition of the Earth Charter drafting process was that people could agree on an ethical principle for different moral reasonings. As Joel Kassiola argues, we can only show that in practice through discussion and debate.

Principle 15 provides an illustrative case study for this difficulty: “Treat all living beings with respect and consideration. a. Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering. b. Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering. c. Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.”

This set of principles was the result of a dialogue involving Inuit and other indigenous peoples for whom hunting and eating wild animals is both a customary practice and a practical necessity; people of faith for whom the taking of animal life is to be avoided; animal rights proponents concerned with the welfare of individual animals whether in the wild, kept as companions, or used commercially. All these groups had different perspectives for why they care about how people treat animals but could agree on the Earth Charter text for principle 15. This was the case for many of the Earth Charter principles where common ground was found among a diversity of groups and communities despite their differing cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies.

However, a limitation of finding common ground is that some—or many—can find themselves caught in a compromising framing. For example, vegetarians and vegans, while agreeing with the intent of Earth Charter Principle 15 in helping address animal suffering, may remain highly critical of these same principles on the basis they serve to validate and reinforce the status quo rather than promote a more radical approach to redefining human-animal relations. Similar criticisms were made by contributors to this dialogue on the basis that a radical re-envisioning is needed of our economic system beyond that given by the Earth Charter (Kavita Byrd, Ian Angus). A basic issue our GTI ethics dialogue therefore raises for me is whether we can have a Great Transition

based on finding common ground among the moral material we currently have to work with or fundamentally new ethical ground needs to be tilled. Where the latter are needed, cultivating such deeper drivers requires fundamentally new ways of thinking (Olivia Bina, Roger Gottlieb).

A number of the contributions (e.g., Roz Savage, Gwendolyn Hallsmith, Kavita Byrd) argued that we—as in the royal we who seek the Great Transition—are in sufficient agreement about the moral compass that guides us that we can put aside any further ethical dialogue and starting rolling up our sleeves and get to work building the new economic and governance systems that we know are needed. I could not agree more about the need for action, but we cannot assume that we all share the same ends and the means to achieve them.

In this regard, I very much support among Ron Engel's nine elements for building a movement capable of providing a strong ethical foundation for the Great Transition, especially, a diagnosis of the geopolitical and economic causes of our present plight and the agencies responsible for it; a strategy for mobilizing political will for confronting these agencies and replacing them with alternative forms of democratic governance; and a covenanted, democratic organizational structure for the movement with the leadership and other resources necessary to advance its influence in all parts of the world.

I remain hopeful that despite its limitations from articulating an ethic based on finding common ground, and the shortcomings arising from being a document of its time, the Earth Charter can still play a role in helping build a strong ethical foundation for the Great Transition.